

# GUARDING THE WALLS IN PSALM 48 AND HAIM GOURI'S NIDMEH LÎ . . . \*

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries the Bible has been mined by literary artists for its seemingly inexhaustible lode of stories, scenes and characters which may be used as prototypes or foils for subsequent literary creations. The process is seen at work already among the biblical writers themselves and then among subsequent writers both Jewish and Christian. In their reshaping and readaptations, their conversations with or subtle allusions to biblical material, these writers invite us to appreciate their own creative use of the biblical tradition and to revisit the tradition itself with new ways of seeing and understanding.

Furthermore, widespread secularization notwithstanding, the Bible continues to exert a powerful influence on writers and society in Israel, the United States and many other parts of the modern world. In such a cultural context, it is not surprising that, even when a writer may not have consciously intended the connection, thoughtful critics may illuminate a contemporary work's significance by setting it in dialogue with a biblical model.

The poem *Nidmeh lî . . .*<sup>1</sup> ("It Seems to Me . . .") by modern Israeli poet Haim Gouri is not directly based on a particular biblical text. Nevertheless, anyone even only slightly versed in the Psalms, particularly those which convey the royal ideology of ancient Judah or the mythology of Jerusalem and the temple mount, could not but agree with Dan Pagis' remark (in Burnshaw, 1965, p. 157) that in this poem the references to the walls of a once-thriving city now long dead carry "biblical overtones [which] are inescapable."

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1. The poem is actually untitled. These are its opening words.

On that hint I have reexamined Psalm 48, with its exuberant celebration of the impregnable walls of Zion, as a foil to Gouri's poem and have developed some cross-illuminations between the two. My reading of the recent literary-critical treatment of Psalm 48 by Robert Alter (1985 and 1987) also influenced my decision to compare this particular psalm to Gouri's composition. I shall refer to Alter's analysis at several points below.

Psalm 48 celebrates the splendor and everlasting security of Mount Zion which is established forever in the city of the great King. *Nidmeh li* . . . presents a sort of photographic negative of this picture. In the following I will examine several key motifs which the two poems share in common, among them images of a fortified city, devastation, ambulation and a focus on the passage of time. Also, I will pay attention to some of the poetic devices by which Gouri and the psalmist evoke sharply contrasting moods as each contemplates his respective city: in the one, a sense of fullness and stability, in the other a feeling of emptiness and disintegration.

### I. *Psalm 48: A Song of the Fortified City*

The image of the securely fortified city is developed architecturally, as it were, in Psalm 48 by means of two powerful stylistic devices, epithets and inclusion.

First, the psalmist literally piles up a whole series of divine names, epithets and attributes alongside a similar series of titles and epithets for the protected city, Jerusalem (although that proper name is never used). It is as if one were building and stockpiling for a siege.

Thus, in the first stanza (vv. 2–9) after an opening identification of the great “LORD . . . our God” (*gādōl YHWH // ʔēlōhēnū*) in v. 2, we are reminded of “God” (*ʔēlōhīm*) in v. 4, and the “LORD of hosts . . . our God . . . God” (*YHWH šēbāʔōt // ʔēlōhēnū . . . ʔēlōhīm*) in v. 9.<sup>2</sup>

In the first section (vv. 10–12) of the second stanza the focus is on the attributes of this God. Thus, we have the progression “God, your *hesed*” (*ʔēlōhīm ḥasdekā*) in v. 10; “your name God . . . your praise . . . your right arm” (*šimkā ʔēlōhīm . . . tēhillātēkā . . . yēmînekā*) in v. 11; and “your judgments” (*mišpātēkā*) in v. 12. The concluding portion of the second stanza also concludes the entire poem in v. 15 with the progression “God

2. The identical progression “LORD . . . our God . . . God” in vv. 2–4 and in v. 9 leads me to disagree with those who suggest deletion of the phrase “in the city of the LORD of hosts” in v. 9.

... our God ... He" (<sup>ʿ</sup>ēlōhîm ... <sup>ʿ</sup>ēlōhēnû ... hû<sup>ʿ</sup>). The stockpiling of all these references to Jerusalem's divine Protector conveys an unmistakable conviction that He is a secure haven of defense (*mišgāb*), as v. 4 would have it.

Alongside and intertwined with this literary assemblage of divine names and epithets is a buildup of references to the fortified city itself. It is "the city of our God ... his holy mountain ... mount Zion ... the recesses/summit of Zaphon ... town of the great King" (<sup>ʿ</sup>îr <sup>ʿ</sup>ēlōhēnû ... *har qodšô* ... *har šīyyôn* ... *yarkētê šāpôn* ... *qiryat melek rāb*) in vv. 2–3, and "the city of the LORD of hosts ... the city of our God" (<sup>ʿ</sup>îr YHWH *šēbāʿôt* ... <sup>ʿ</sup>îr <sup>ʿ</sup>ēlōhēnû) in v. 9. Again in v. 12 it is "mount Zion" (here elegantly paired as a singular to its satellite towns "the daughters of Judah" (*har šīyyôn* // *bēnôt yēhûdāh*), and it is "Zion" again in v. 13. Nor are we left without reference to "her citadels," "her towers" and "her rampart" in vv. 4, 13 and 14 (*ʿarmēnôtêhā*; *migdālêhā* ... *ḥêlāh* ... *ʿarmēnôtêhā*). Surely, this city is well-fortified!<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, as if this stockpiling of names and epithets for God and his city and this brick and mortar interlacing of references to the defenses and the Defender were not sufficient to convey a notion of the city's impregnability, the psalmist has resorted to a second stylistic device, namely, inclusion or enveloping structure.

Mitchell Dahood (1965, p. 290) already identified a smaller inclusion that envelopes vv. 2 and 3 by linking "great is the LORD" and "the great King" (*gādôl YHWH* ... *melek rāb*), a stylistic basis for arguing that the great King is none other than the LORD himself.<sup>4</sup> Alter (1985, p. 124) has drawn attention to the manner in which, on a larger scale, "the four concluding lines of the poem ... revert, in a loose envelope structure, to the perspective with which the poem began." I think this is quite clear. As I have shown above, references to the city and its Divine Defender are heavily concentrated in vv. 2–4 and vv. 12–15.

There is, moreover, another striking inclusion in the first stanza itself. The stanza literally surrounds the attacking alliance of kings (v. 5) by the "great LORD ... our God" (v. 2) and the "LORD of hosts ... our God" (v. 9) at its start and close (see Appendix 1). If these kings had plotted to

3. Othmar Keel (1978, pp. 16–18, 113–20 and 179–82) affords helpful iconographical evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Near East for recreating the imaginative picture of the well-fortified temple city in Psalm 48.

4. Alter (1985, p. 122) supports this same identification on the basis of a "heightening movement" which he detects in the opening verses of the psalm.

encircle the *ʿîr ʔēlōhênû*, the *har qodšô*, the very progression of the psalm shows how they themselves have been encircled and brought to ruin!<sup>5</sup>

Alter (1985, pp. 123–24) has drawn attention to the affinities of the description of the devastation of the kings in vv. 6–7 to vv. 14–15 of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15. The vocabulary of fright and trembling matches: in Psalm 48 it describes the kings, in Exodus 15 the inhabitants of Philistia and the leaders and chieftains of Edom and Moab. Both poems present the contrasting juxtaposition of the destruction of an enemy fleet by stormwinds and an engulfing sea and the firm-founded sanctuary of Israel's God.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the psalmist stockpiles a crescendo-like series of verbs of fear and trembling in vv. 6–7 to describe the attacking kings: when they came and saw, unlike Caesar, they did not conquer! Rather, in the colorful translation of the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) version (1981), "they were stunned, they were terrified, they panicked, they were seized . . . with a trembling, like a woman in the throes of labor." What a stunning contrast to the defensive stockpiles for the city discussed above.

Returning to the encircling motif, I would note that what is implicit in the structure of the opening stanza, is made explicit in the content of vv. 13–14. Here an unspecified group of people are either invited or challenged to go round the city. Perhaps these are pilgrim worshippers, as suggested by most commentators, or perhaps the defeated kings or any other would-be enemies of the protected city (also anyone who reads or sings this psalm). A full circuit will enable them (and us) to take in the physical fortifications of the city, a reflection of its supernatural Protection, so that they (and we) may pass on the report of its strength to the next generation.

Overall, we may describe Psalm 48 as a song of strong contrasts. There is little penumbral here. Everything, rather, is out in the light for all to see. There is no doubt about who are the "good guys" and who the "bad

5. Many commentators past (e.g., the editorial heading in the Geneva Bible) and present have attempted to identify the specific military crisis or general political events which occasioned Psalm 48. Alter (1985, p. 123; 1987, p. 257) also seems to accept a historical reference here to an actual failed naval invasion, although he notes that the reference now is clothed in archetypal images. I prefer Dahood's opinion (1965, p. 291) that here and elsewhere in hymns of this type "the kings are mere literary foils." Sigmund Mowinckel (1967), in line with his mythic-cultic interpretation of the Psalms, states flatly that events like those described in Psalm 48 "never happened in actual history" (vol. 1, p. 110) and should be understood as one version of the "myth about the fight of nations" (vol. 1, pp. 151–52).

6. Earlier, Mowinckel (1967, vol. 1, pp. 151–55) also highlighted several points of contact between Psalm 48 and Exodus 15.

guys.” Everything is revealed. The kings see ( $rā^{2}û$ , v. 6) and crumble in panic and defeat. But those who belong to the LORD and his city both hear and see ( $šāma^{c}nû . . . rā^{2}înû$ , v. 9) to their great joy and exultation (v. 12). For, even before the kings assembled (*ham-mēlākîm nō<sup>c</sup>ādû*, v. 5), the great King, evidently God, was revealed (*melek rāb . . . nōda<sup>c</sup>*, vv. 3–4) as a sure defense. The ramparts of the city (*hēlāh*, v. 14) stand as a foil to the writhing in labor (*hîl*, v. 7) of the kings.<sup>7</sup>

The Psalm leads us inexorably to two climactic actions of “God, our God,” at the end of each stanza: his firm establishment of the city forever (*yēkōnēnehā<sup>c</sup> ad<sup>c</sup> ôlām<sup>2</sup>*, v. 9) and his leading us forever (reading *hû<sup>2</sup> yēnahăgēnû<sup>2</sup> \*ôlāmôt* with many manuscripts, v. 15).

In response to this powerfully persuasive presentation, who would not wish also to be encircled securely within the fortified city? One can hardly resist joining in the first-person response already provided by the psalmist at the midpoint of the song: “We have seen represented (*dimminû*),<sup>8</sup> O God, your covenant-loyalty (*hesed*) in the midst of your temple” (v. 10). Who could do otherwise than respond enthusiastically to the charge to “consider this well” (*šîtu libbekem lē-*, v. 14) and spread the report to the coming generation (v. 14) of this God and this city already renowned throughout the world (*kol hā<sup>2</sup>āreš*, v. 3; *al qašwē<sup>2</sup> ereš*, v. 11)?

## II. *Nidmeh lî . . . : An Elegy for a City Long Dead*

*ābāl ānî šômēr hōmôt šel<sup>c</sup> ir<sup>2</sup> āšer gāwē<sup>c</sup>āh lipnê šānîm!*

If all is clearly revealed in Psalm 48, such is not the case in *Nidmeh lî . . .* (see Appendix 2).<sup>9</sup> No stockpiling of grand titles and attributes for the city here. No identification of its erstwhile protectors, if any, divine or human. No indication of its enemies, if any. Indeed, the city may never

7. This analysis suggests that there is deliberate punning on *nōda<sup>c</sup>* (root *YD<sup>c</sup>*) and *nō<sup>c</sup>ādû* (root *Y<sup>c</sup>D*). Alter (1985, p. 123) also notes the “pointed antithesis” underscored by the employment of these two words. I am suggesting that this may also be the case for *hîl* and *hēlāh* (reading “her rampart[s]”).

8. This somewhat awkward translation attempts to convey how the temple precincts “represent” or “image” the faithfulness of the LORD, an idea stated in another manner in vv. 13–15. Alternately, *dimminû* has been translated “we have glimpsed” (Alter, 1985), “we have thought on” (RSV), “we meditate upon” (NJPS), “we have reflected on” (Dahood, 1965). It is fortuitous but interesting that the same root *DMH* appears here as in the opening word of Gouri’s poem.

9. *Nidmeh lî . . .*, with accompanying translation by Dan Pagis, is reproduced here from the Schocken Books publication by Burnshaw, Carmi and Spicehandler (1965, pp. 156–57). The poem also has been translated by Bernhard Frank (1980, p. 77), who presents the opening (title) line as “I fancy that I’m standing guard. . . .”

have existed actually. The voice of the poetic narrator expresses, rather, his feeling of guarding an imagined city, unnamed, that died a long time ago (line 1) . . . that died years ago (line 13).

All we know of this city is that it has walls. But they do not guard the city. It is the narrator who guards them, as a memory of another time, another experience.<sup>10</sup> There is no talk of sacred mountains, citadels and towers here. These walls guard the disintegrated past no better than the walls of an ashtray guard the burnt remains of tobacco, no better than the walls of a coffee cup guard the drink already gone cold.

In stark contrast to the inclusions in Psalm 48 which literally encircle the enemy for destruction and surround the LORD's city and people with divine protection, the inclusion formed by the opening and closing lines of this poem surrounds unspecified "things" (*had-dēbārîm*) abandoned by time. These "things" come back to live apart from time (line 7), to live more slowly (line 8), but only next to the ashtrays and the coffee cups growing cold (lines 9–10).

Alter (1985, p. 124) has shown how effectively the nexus of temporal images in Psalm 48 brings together historical and mythical conceptions of time and presents a unified picture of the present, the past recent and distant, and the future reaching to an indefinite "evermore." In *Nidmeh lî* . . . , however, the "outdated" narrator is trying to hold onto a time that appears to have disintegrated into bits and pieces (i.e., minutes and seconds) which can be ticked away by wristwatches.<sup>11</sup>

Bernhard Frank (1980, p. 77) effectively evokes the poetic narrator's conflicting sense of time with his somewhat paraphrastic translation of lines 5–7:

I thread my path amid relics which time has abandoned; move on.  
Yet they survive, outside that striding time which crumbles in the clocks.

This paraphrase also heightens the poem's sense of an inexorable march of time ("striding") that mimics the narrator's self-conscious walking ("I thread my path") and underscores the futility of trying to preserve things ("relics") abandoned by a time which itself has lost continuity ("crumbles into clocks").

Readers of the poem cannot but help realize that, after all, the poetic narrator, too, is just passing by (*ôbēr*, line 6). With an eye to Psalm 48,

10. In private correspondence (dated October 20, 1988) Gouri has noted that in modern Hebrew the idiom "guardians of the walls" refers to those who adhere to values and principles that may be passé. Indeed, "the man in the poem recognizes his being outdated."

11. In the correspondence referred to in note 10, Gouri confirmed the wristwatch imagery for line 7.

we might ask: What could the narrator relate that might make sense "to the next generation"? What of lasting value could he share before he, too, must finally abandon his fanciful guardianship of the walls?

Dan Pagis (in Burnshaw, 1965, p. 157) remarks that *Nidmeh lî* . . . "gives an impression of looseness" even in its poetic form, that the "effect of a regular meter is quite lacking because of the great variations in line length . . . and of the tired 'crumbling' tone." But I would call attention to a sort of structure afforded by repeated references to the narrative "I." *Nidmeh lî* in line 1 is echoed by *hēm šābîm ʔēlāy* . . . *šābîm ʔēlāy* in line 8, while *ʔānî šômēr* in line 1 is taken up by *ʔānî hōlēk* . . . *ʕōbēr* in lines 5–6, *ʔānî marbeh lāleket* in line 11, and again *ʔānî šômēr* in the closing line. The viewpoint conveyed is intensely introspective. And the repeated *ʔānî, lî, ʔēlāy* emphasize how the narrator is guarding the walls of his own imagined city, and leave us outside the walls, as it were, peeking over and wondering just what the things are that he wanders among as they keep coming back to him, coming back to him.

In a way, then, more by our feeling somewhat excluded than by an outright invitation, we are drawn to walk around this city with the poetic narrator just as we circled Jerusalem/Zion with the psalmist. But whereas God was revealed, heard of, seen, thought of, and witnessed to for a coming generation in Psalm 48, here we see, rather, the lights which merely shadow a real light that was extinguished years ago (lines 3–4). Here, there is not so much knowledge, as there is seeming (line 1), and vague recollection (line 8), and a great deal of guessing (line 11) and the benefit of the doubt (line 12).

If there are stark contrasts drawn in Psalm 48 between us and them, between the kings and the Great King, between protected city and defenseless attackers, here there are contrasts, too. But they are more subtle. There is a brightness, for example, in the assonance of those words that speak of illumination (*ham-mēʔîrîm*, line 3) and of things (*had-dēbārîm*, line 5) that live (*ḥayyîm*, line 7) outside of disintegrating time. The brightness, however, pales before the dark assonances of words that speak of the walls (*hômôt*, lines 1 and 13) that surround a city now dead (*gāwēʕāh*, lines 1 and 13) and the lights (*ʔôrôt*, line 3) that are but the testaments of a light gone out (*kābāh*, line 4) years ago. All these things already have been abandoned by time (*haz-zēman ʕāzab ʔôlām*, line 5). So again, we are also left, as it were, neither fully in the light nor the dark but in the penumbra felt by the narrator himself and reflected in twilight assonances neither bright nor dark: *nidmeh*, line 1; *wēnehēneh*, line 12.

There are no sides here. Neither are we urged implicitly or explicitly to take sides. No need to trumpet anything to the ends of the earth or the

coming generation, as in Psalm 48. Rather, we are led to join the narrator, perhaps only from behind our own walls of reverie and out of our own experiences of death or abandonment, in that final sigh of resignation: <sup>ʔ</sup>*ābāl*. This “but,” this “oh, well,” occurs at the end of other Gouri poems, as at the end of <sup>ʔ</sup>*Immô* (“His Mother”)<sup>12</sup> and *Yěruššāh* (“Heritage”).<sup>13</sup> It seems to alert us to the central insight to be shared with us by the poetic narrator—and, it seems, by Gouri himself. In each instance, it signals an insight that reverses, or at least soberly qualifies, the intention or revelation of a biblical text. At the close of <sup>ʔ</sup>*Immô*, we hear of Sisera’s mother that “*Ābāl*, she died a short time after the death of her son.” At the close of *Yěruššāh*, we hear that while Isaac was spared the knife of Abraham, “*Ābāl*, that hour he bequeathed (*hōrîš*) to his offspring; they are born with a knife in their heart.” In *Nidmeh lî* . . . we are brought back to where we started, but not quite. For if, “*It seems to me* that I am guarding the walls of a city that died a long time ago,” the qualification, as Dan Pagis observes (in Burnshaw, 1965, p. 157), is dropped in the repeated line: “*Ābāl*, I am guarding the walls of a city that died years ago.”

This city that died years ago—is this the Jerusalem of Psalm 48?<sup>14</sup> Is this the Jerusalem for which Gouri himself fought as a military man over many years?<sup>15</sup> Is this every <sup>ʕ</sup>*ir ʔēlōhēnû*, every *har šiyyôn*, every *qiryat melek rāb* to which human beings often entrust their security <sup>ʕ</sup>*ad ʕōlām*, but which, inevitably, will be revealed in some future time as *gāwēʕāh lipnê zeman rab* (line 1), *gāwēʕāh lipnê šānîm* (line 13)?

### Conclusion

Alter (1985, pp. 124–5) has observed that many modern readers may be nervous about the mixture of politics and faith evident in Psalm 48 and the presentation, fraught with tension, of a world-embracing God who nevertheless chooses a single place and takes sides in the large sweep of history. For such readers and others Gouri’s poem raises the questions anew: No need to take sides—or is there? Are there walls of cities long

12. <sup>ʔ</sup>*Immô* is translated and commented upon by Dan Pagis in Burnshaw, Carmi and Spicehandler (1965, pp. 158–59). A recent analysis of <sup>ʔ</sup>*Immô* appears in Urbrock (1987).

13. An English translation of *Yěruššāh* by Naomi Tauber and Howard Schwartz, under the title “Isaac,” appears in Schwartz and Rudolf (1980, p. 98).

14. In the correspondence referred to in note 10, Gouri wrote that he “did not have in mind biblical motifs” when he composed *Nidmeh lî* . . . but “could easily see” the allusion.

15. Gouri served in the Israeli Palmach, fought during the War of Independence and co-commanded the Jerusalem Brigade during the Six Day War. Fuller biographical materials may be found in Bargat and Chyet (1986, pp. 57–59).



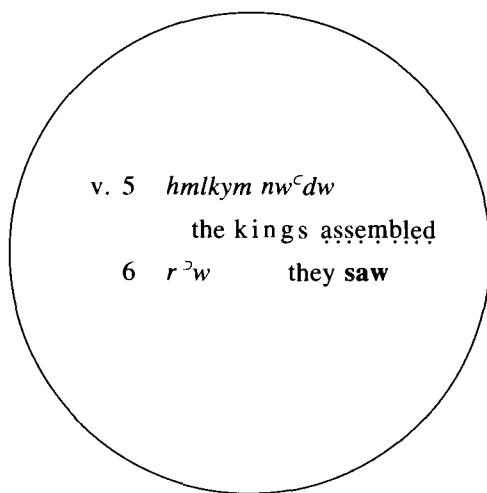
dead that we still guard? Are they worth the effort? Are we also free to guess and enjoy the benefit of the doubt? How does it seem to us?

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APPENDIX 1:  
A PATTERN OF ENCIRCLEMENT IN PSALM 48:2–9

v. 2	<i>gdwl YHWH</i>	Great (is the) <i>LORD</i>
	<i>ʕyr ʔlhynw</i>	city of <i>our God</i>
	<i>hr qdšw</i>	his holy mountain
3	<i>mlk rb</i>	great King
4	<i>ʔlhym . . . nwdʕ lmšgb</i>	<i>God . . . revealed as a bulwark</i>



9	<i>rʔynw</i>	we saw
	<i>bʕyr YHWH šbʔwt //</i>	in the city of (the) <i>LORD</i> of hosts //
	<i>bʕyr ʔlhynw</i>	in the city of <i>our God</i>
	<i>ʔlhym</i>	<i>God</i>

Note the repeated progression, “LORD . . . our God . . . God” in vv. 2–4 and v. 9.

## APPENDIX 2

- נִדְמָה לִי כִּי אֲנִי שׁוֹמֵר חוֹמוֹת שֶׁל עִיר  
 2 אֲשֶׁר גָּזְעָה לִפְנֵי זְמַן רַב.
- אֹרוֹת הַמְּאִירִים אוֹתִי כָּעַת  
 4 הֵם צִנְאוֹת שֶׁל אֹר אֲשֶׁר כָּבָה לִפְנֵי שָׁנִים.
- אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ בֵּין הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הַזְמַן עֶזַב אוֹתָם,  
 6 עוֹבֵר.
- וְהֵם חַיִּים בְּלִי זְמַן הוֹלֵךְ וּמִתְפֹּרֵר בְּשָׁעוֹנִים.
- הֵם שָׁכִים אֵלַי, שָׁכִים אֵלַי לַחֲיוֹת יוֹתֵר לְאֵט.  
 9 לֵיד מְאֻפְרוֹת.
- לֵיד סִפְלֵי קָפָה מְצֻטְנָנִים.
- אֲנִי מְרַבָּה לִלְכֹת וּלְנַחֵשׁ  
 12 וְנִהְיָה מִהֶסֶפֶק.
- אֲבָל אֲנִי שׁוֹמֵר חוֹמוֹת שֶׁל עִיר אֲשֶׁר גָּזְעָה לִפְנֵי  
 שָׁנִים.

## IT SEEMS TO ME . . .

Translated by Dan Pagis

(1) It seems to me that I guard the walls of a city (2) That died a long time ago.

(3) Lights which now illumine me (4) Are the (last-will-and-) testaments of a light which went out years ago.

(5) I walk between the things that time has abandoned, (6) Pass on. (7) And they live without time, which gradually disintegrates in clocks.

(8) They come back to me, come back to me to live more slowly, (9) Next to ashtrays, (10) Next to cups of coffee growing cold.

(11) I walk a great deal and guess (a great deal) (12) And enjoy the benefit of the doubt.

(13) But I guard the walls of a city that died years ago.